

## **MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Our Nation observes and celebrates Black History Month in honor of the many exceptional contributions that African Americans have made to our country. This year's theme, "African Americans and the Civil War," is an opportunity to learn about the contributions of African Americans during the most deadly and divisive war in our Nation's history—a war that began over slavery, and the outcome of which ended forever slavery's injustices at a cost of over 600,000 American lives. It is difficult to look forward, both as a Nation and as a Department, if we do not take the time to know and understand this important chapter of our own history.

This month we revisit the past and honor brave Americans like Sergeant William Harvey Carney of the U.S. Army's battle-hardened 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry—the first African American awarded the Medal of Honor on July 18, 1863. His unit, like many other all Black regiments, went on to distinguish themselves in battle, ultimately helping to reunite a divided America.

Our history as a democratic Nation is richer because of the service of African Americans; the list of those who have served with honor is long, and their many achievements are both broad in scope and deep in value. Today, 2.3 million of our Veterans are African Americans. Men and women, young and old, from every generation, they constitute the largest minority group of Veterans in our Nation's history.

Our diversity at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is a reflection of the diversity among the Veterans we are privileged to serve. Just as Veterans of every race, color, and creed have strengthened our Nation, so too does such diversity make VA stronger as an institution. By celebrating Black History Month and remembering our past as a Nation and as a Department, we rededicate ourselves to a brighter future and greater strength as we move forward.

Please join me in celebrating Black History Month, in appreciating the heritage of "African Americans and the Civil War," and in honoring the significant contributions that African Americans have made to our country.

Eric K. Shinseki